



San
Joaquin
River
Management
Program

P.O. Box 942836, Sacramento, CA 94236-0001

April 26, 2001

Mr. Chris Robinson
Merced River Stakeholder Group
Post Office Box 10
Merced, California 95341

Dear Mr. Robinson:

I am writing in support of Lower Merced River Water Quality Baseline Assessment.

The San Joaquin River Management Program provides a forum to identify problems and solutions to issues related to wildlife, flood protection, water quality, water supply, fisheries, and recreation. The SJRMP Action Team and Advisory Council have reviewed and discussed this project, and support the effort to reduce water quality impacts in the San Joaquin River system.

The Advisory Council is in support of the Lower Merced River Water Quality Baseline assessment proposed by the Merced River Stakeholder Group, and understands that this project will provide information to improve or prevent further degradation of water quality along the Merced River.

The 1995 San Joaquin River Management Plan recommends many projects and studies to improve water quality in the San Joaquin River system. This recommendation is based on providing valuable information to landowners and interested parties, and increasing their ability to understand the current water quality conditions.

If you have any questions in this regard, please contact Paula Landis, Action Team Chair, at (559) 230-3310.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tim Ramirez'.

Tim Ramirez, Advisory Council Chair
San Joaquin River Management Program

**SUPPORTING
DOCUMENTATION
IS ON THE
FOLLOWING PAGES**

CONCEPT PROPOSAL FORM II

For proposals with emphasis on watershed assessment or monitoring

Use this form to describe your concept for a proposal or project to apply to the CALFED Watershed Program for funding support. Use only the space provided, leaving at least a half inch margin with type size no smaller than 10 points. These guidelines are also available in electronic format on the Watershed Program web site:

Baydeltawatershed.org

Project and Applicant Information:

Name of project:

Lower Merced River Water Quality Baseline Assessment Budget Estimate:

Funds requested: \$168,000

TOTAL: \$168,000

Project Applicants(s) and/or Principal Investigator(s) and affiliation(s) B
use an additional sheet if necessary:

The Merced River Stakeholder Group is the primary applicant. The group is composed of landowners, industry, environmental interests, state, federal and local agencies, recreationists and citizens with an interest in the conservation and restoration of the lower Merced River and Watershed. This project also supports and is supported by the Merced River Education Initiative, a grassroots initiative among educators and Merced County community members.

Project manager or contact person, address, telephone and email (if fiscal agent is different, provide that information, also):

Merced River Stakeholder Group, c/o Chris Robinson, P.O. Box 10, Merced, CA 95341 (209) 722-2502, robinsoncattle@hotmail.com

Fiscal Agent: Merced Irrigation District charitable Foundation Inc. or local non-profit currently under formation

Project Abstract (include the county, watershed or other geographic reference):

The Merced River Stakeholders seek funding to promote voluntary compliance with mandated water quality objectives. Existing water quality data does not provide sufficient information to direct efforts at improving or preventing the further degradation of water quality along the Merced River. This project will remedy this insufficiency, enhance overall compliance, and develop local awareness in the management of our primary water resource.

If your concept proposal is not selected for further consideration in this round of funding, would you like referral to other possible funding sources?

YES XX NO

1. Describe your anticipated outcome, or what you plan to achieve, and what

practices or programs you intend to use. If a research project, explain the hypothesis and methods on which your concept is based.

The basic hypothesis for this water quality baseline assessment is that an informed community is better able to identify watershed issues, and to resolve watershed problems than a community which is poorly informed and fragmented in its knowledge. The water quality baseline assessment will provide critical data necessary to identify potential water quality problems along the Merced River by compiling a three year publicly available data set charting pH, dissolved oxygen, temperature, and the nitrate and phosphorus load. This data will assist the on-going efforts for the restoration of the Merced River, improve stewardship of the water resource, provide a complement to the geomorphological perspective, assist in validating the success or failure of any restoration/enhancement or best management practices proposed for the Merced River, and raise the level of awareness that is critical in developing consensus for preventing further degradation of water quality and creating publicly supported water quality solutions.

2. Describe the level of community involvement and activity anticipated in this project, including the following elements:

a. How will your activity promote community and landowner/user involvement in watershed management?

Current experience with the Merced River Stakeholder Group has shown that the participants are very action oriented. When they see how a new idea might help their business or land management activity, they are quick to implement it or to ask other resource people within the group for assistance. Due to the overwhelming majority of landowner involvement and drive for this project coupled with the influence that this group has in the community, access and proactive dialogue to ensure improved compliance is virtually guaranteed.

b. What level of support is there from the local community and agencies?

This proposal was generated at the direction of the Merced River Stakeholder Group which includes landowners, Merced County, the San Joaquin Raptor Center, Merced Irrigation District, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, recreational interests, East Merced Resource Conservation District, aggregate mining interests, agricultural interests, California Departments of Fish and Game, Transportation, Water resources, flyfishers, and community interests. Attendance at stakeholder Group meetings ranges from 25 to 70 individuals.

c. How will the activity foster collaboration among multiple interests or scientific disciplines?

The baseline assessment will direct our discussions and provide an opportunity to encourage developing partnerships and provide additional impetus for new collaboration. The infrastructure and the capacity to discuss potential water quality problems is in place but without data it is very difficult to have an intelligent discussion about water quality.

d. How will your project reach out to and encourage the active participation of local leadership and diverse community interests?

By providing valuable information to inform the decision-makers in the community about the current status of our resource.

Correlation of this project with the educational component of the Merced River Education Initiative through teachers and classroom involvement will

reach out to a broader community, also. This spring the Stakeholder Group and the East Merced Resource Conservation District will host a tour of the lower watershed for local and regional community leadership. If this concept is accepted, this group can be more closely involved.

e. How will the activity contribute to on-going effective local management of the watershed?

This activity will complement on-going watershed activities by providing community information on topical areas not currently or consistently addressed. CALFED is currently funding the development of a focussed river restoration plan which addresses geomorphic and riparian habitat concepts only. The Merced River Stakeholder Group is recognizing that watershed stewardship extends beyond these concepts and seeks to build on the current planning effort. Ultimately, when informed about potential water quality impacts of particular management practices and presented with economically feasible alternatives, landowners will work to adopt alternatives that correct problems caused by their individual actions. The baseline information will aid in identifying the most efficacious alternative techniques.

f. What are the potential benefits to the local community, and how will those benefits be measured?

The potential benefits to the community will vary from individuals taking small actions, like proper disposal of potential water contaminants in one's home, to major landowners making substantial changes in their land use practices. The benefits to the local community will be measured primarily through the production of the water quality data set and delivery to CALFED and all other local participants.

g. How will the project benefits be distributed equitably within the community?

h. How does your project promote local community involvement with the continued development and implementation of the CALFED Bay Delta Program? The topical areas will be chosen to link community information needs with goals and objectives of the CALFED Bay Delta Program. For example - water quality in the Merced River is not only an issue locally, but also in regions downstream of the river.

3. Describe how the concept demonstrates the value and contributions of watershed management (using a community based and locally led approach) to achieving CALFED goals for the Bay delta system and broader solution area (see Section 7).

Prior to 1998 there were no watershed oriented groups or for a in existence on the Merced River. Landowners in the lower watershed will tell you that the last time they got together was about 25 years ago when their water rights were threatened. In general the community is small, rural and fiercely independent and individualistic. Restoration actions to enhance salmon populations on the Merced River have been proceeding since the 1970's led by agencies like the California Department of Fish and Game. Until recently, these actions were addressed on a site-by site basis. Creation of the Merced River Stakeholder Group has facilitated significant information exchange among all participants and has fostered a recognition of both common issues and divergent opinions. The group was initially highly suspicious of outside interests like CALFED and agencies providing funding to do actions on their river. Over the past 2 ½ years of working together the community has developed an understanding of ecosystem quality issues important to CALFED but from the perspective of how ecosystem quality affects their lives, businesses and community. In part this has resulted from the CVPIA-Anadromous Fish Restoration Program providing funding to

Merced County and the East Merced Resource Conservation District to help establish the Stakeholder Group and from CALFED providing funding to the County and Stillwater Sciences to develop baseline geomorphic and riparian information and a fluvial process oriented restoration plan.

In addition, the Stakeholder Group has recently identified other topical areas where they feel the community does not have sufficient information to identify problems and appropriate actions. These topics include water quality, water supply (very important if UC Merced proceeds), and floodway management, which are also CALFED goals. The baseline assessment is proposed as the first step to creating a community dialog relating to these issues and to identifying problem resolutions. The connection to CALFED keeps an awareness in the community that their choices upstream do affect downstream conditions.

4. Describe how the proposal promotes one or more of the initial implementation priorities of the Watershed Program (see Section 5).

This proposal strongly supports capacity building in the local community. By the time that funds for this project become available, the Geomorphic and Riparian Restoration planning process should be nearing completion. The baseline study is intended to provide continuing impetus to encourage the Stakeholder Group to continue to progress in its stewardship of the watershed by identifying the next key issue areas for action. This proposal also supports watershed education, both for the community and for the formal educational institutions by providing in-service opportunities for Merced County teachers. Added community awareness will also provide support for on-going and future restoration actions on the lower Merced River. Additionally there is the opportunity in this River Town Hall series to focus one session on related actions occurring in the upper Merced River watershed.

5. Describe how your proposal will establish or enhance a partnership between the local community and the CALFED Bay Delta Program.

Previous CALFED Bay Delta Program funding for the Merced River Restoration plan development was initially received with a high level of local skepticism. The project was perceived as being generated outside the local community and not addressing local issues. The process of establishing a Stakeholder Group and actively providing them tools, access to agency resources, and engaging them in the planning process has substantially reduced (but not eliminated) that skepticism. In this project, the Stakeholder Group has identified the need and the group is approaching the CALFED Bay-Delta Program for assistance. The topics identified by the group for study under this water quality analysis also are compatible with issues identified by the CALFED Bay-Delta Program. This is an opportunity for the CALFED Bay-Delta Program to continue interaction with the local community and support a community generated project, thereby increasing the mutual value of that partnership.

6. Describe how your project will promote information exchange, including project monitoring and the transfer of technical information, among CALFED and others interested in watershed management.

The essence of this project is information production and distribution. Companion grants will more fully address the dissemination of that data.

7. Describe here any other important aspects of your program that you could not address in the above items, and that you feel are critical to fully describing your concept.

Do you anticipate a desire for possible technical assistance from CALFED to fully develop your proposal? Y__X__ N_____.

If yes, what type of assistance do you anticipate?

Feedback on areas to strengthen proposal. Recommendations for scientific personnel to assist in evaluating data.